

**STATEMENT OF
ACTING CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL**

Re: *Rates for Interstate Inmate Calling Services*, WC Docket No. 12-375, Third Report and Order, Order on Reconsideration, and Fifth Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (May 20, 2021)

With today's action the Federal Communications Commission takes a step forward to address the high cost that incarcerated people and their families pay for phone service. Let me be clear: This is not the last action we will take because there is more that needs to be done. I know the road to phone justice has been too hard and taken too long.

But also I believe every step counts. Because this is not just an issue of markets and rates; it is a broader issue of social justice. Consider that across the country 2.7 million children have at least one parent who is incarcerated. In many cases, those who are incarcerated are separated from their families by hundreds of miles and their kin may not have the time and means to make regular visits. Phone calls are the only way these families can stay connected. But when a single call can cost as much as most of us pay for an unlimited monthly plan, the financial burden of staying in touch can be too much to bear. This harms the families and children of the incarcerated. But it goes beyond that. It harms all of us because we know that regular contact with family members reduces recidivism.

Now consider the pandemic. It has touched every corner of American life. But the incarcerated have been hit especially hard. According to one analysis, nearly 400,000 have been sickened by this cruel virus. Nearly 2,700 have died. But that's not all. The dangers of COVID-19 have led many prisons and jails to stop in-person visitation. That makes simple phone calls more important than ever.

So today we provide relief to incarcerated people and their families. Recognizing the exigent circumstances caused by the pandemic, we lower interim interstate rates for prisons and the largest jails. This means that interstate rates will fall by more than a third for the vast majority of those who are incarcerated. For the first time ever, we cap international rates. No longer will providers be able to charge an immigrant 25 dollars to make a three-minute call to his or her family abroad. We eliminate the outdated surcharge for collect calls. And we make it clear that providers must give incarcerated people with disabilities functionally equivalent communications services.

But again, this is only a step forward. We include a rulemaking so we can clear the way for further reforms. We will collect better data for all facilities. We will take a hard look at whether site commissions that providers pay prisons or jails should be permitted at all. We will investigate whether the current ancillary service charges for placing a single call or for using a credit card are just and reasonable, as required by the Communications Act. And we will press harder on ensuring functionally equivalent access for incarcerated people with disabilities.

There is more we can do. Because as a matter of social justice we are not yet where we need to be. But we wouldn't even be here now without two women who got this effort started and put us on the road we are on today.

There is Martha Wright. It was nearly two decades ago that Martha Wright petitioned this agency to rein in the unconscionably high rates paid to call incarcerated people. She did this because it was personal. She was a grandmother who wanted to keep in touch with her grandson. She passed away several years ago but her legacy lives on.

There is also my former colleague and former Acting Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn. When others were presented with the petition from Martha Wright, they looked away. It was uncomfortable. It was a cause too hard, a proceeding too rough, and the legal issues too thorny. But she saw a wrong that we needed to make right. She called on this agency to act. And her efforts and her moral compass led us to where we are now.

So we will continue to press on in their honor and on behalf of the millions of families who deserve the ability to simply keep in touch with their loved ones who are incarcerated. We also praise those in Congress who have long championed legislation to fix this problem. That includes Senator Tammy Duckworth and Congressman Bobby Rush, who deserve special note for their efforts to extend our jurisdiction to cover the high cost of intrastate calls.

Finally, I want to thank the professional staff of this agency, many of whom have worked for years to address these matters. They include Irina Asoskov, Susan Bahr, Allison Baker, Larry Barnes, Peter Bean, Michelle Berlove, Kimberley Bradley, Justin Faulb, Amy Goodman, William Kehoe, Minsoo Kim, Albert Lewis, Rhonda Lien, Kris Monteith, Katherine Morehead, Terri Natoli, Erik Raven-Hansen, Sherry Ross, Marvin Sacks, Simon Solemani, and Gil Strobel of the Wireline Competition Bureau; Bob Aldrich, Diane Burstein, Eliot Greenwald, Debra Patkin, and Patrick Webre of the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau; Peter Alexander, Connor Altman, Mark Azic, Tavi Carare, Paula Cech, Keaton Cobble, Stacy Jordan, Susan Lee, Steven Kauffman, Ying Ke, Eugene Kiselev, Dick Kwiatkowski, Giulia McHenry, Amy Nathan, Eric Ralph, Daniel Shiman, Emily Talaga, Shane Taylor, Mack Wachala, and Geoff Waldau of the Office of Economics and Analytics; and Sarah Citrin, Michelle Ellison, Valerie Hill, Jake Lewis, Marcus Maher, Rick Mallen, Linda Oliver, Joel Rabinovitz, and Bill Richardson of the Office of General Counsel.